

## PROLOGUE

*December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2012.*

**ALERT! MISSILE LAUNCH DETECTED.**

Air Force Lieutenant Michael Avery had just poured himself a third lukewarm cup of coffee when the words flashed in urgent red across his communication console.

Until now, it had been an uneventful shift for Avery. The telescopes, radar installations, and other monitoring assets coordinated through his station deep inside the Cheyenne Mountain Air Force facility were functioning nominally. There hadn't been so much as a single unidentified aircraft over the entire North American continent the whole day.

Avery straightened up in his chair and pulled his stomach close to the desk, shaking fatigue from his eyes. The chronometer on his console registered 0048 GMT – 1748 local time. Adrenaline began coursing through his system.

The lieutenant's first job was to determine whether this alert reflected an actual missile launch, or a mere system anomaly. System glitches of this sort were rare, but they had to be ruled out.

Soon ancillary data began flowing from remote detection sites to the secondary monitors on Avery's console. The earliest data – heat signatures and radar reflections from Defense Department satellites – arrived within seconds. Radar confirmation from the Aegis Ballistic Missile Detection System

aboard the USS Bunker Hill guided missile cruiser in the Sea of Japan soon followed.

These reports confirmed the alert was no technical malfunction. A ballistic missile launch had, in fact, occurred. And North Korea was at the controls.

Avery redirected all data from his console to the white reflective panels blanketing the curved wall of the communications center. Nearly deserted sixty seconds ago, the center was now awash with personnel, both military and civilian. More streamed in through the passageway between the center's double blast doors. Many took seats among the rows of concave computer stations that faced the wall displays. Others, off-shift backups and technical support, lined the center's side walls, ready to lend aid should it be required.

Lieutenant Avery had confirmed the threat and spread the word. His job was done. From this point forward, higher level decision-makers – generals, admirals, the Secretary of Defense, and even the President of the United States – would make the calls concerning the U.S. response to this emerging threat.

Though information now flowed automatically in real time to all necessary personnel, Avery remained alert for any communications glitches that might require his attention. With the initial adrenaline rush dwindling, he decided he could spare a few seconds for a swallow of the now cold coffee – and to catch his breath – as he observed the ballistic missile threat unfolding before him.

In the fifty seconds it had taken for Avery to process the launch data and complete his duties, the blinking object on the projected world map had arced upward from North Korea's Pyeongan Province and traced a green line several hundred kilometers due south across open water. *At least the missile hadn't been aimed at South Korea, he thought, or Japan.* His

fingers tapped nervously beside the keyboard. *The Philippines might still get hit, though.*

At one minute fifty-nine seconds launch time, data from STRATCOM computers indicated that the rocket's first stage had separated from the missile and fallen into the waters off the western coastline of South Korea. Ninety seconds later, the second stage separated somewhere over the South China Sea. The missile's path continued southerly – directly toward the heart of the Philippine Island cluster.

One of nine unified commands in the U.S. Defense Department, United States Strategic Command (STRATCOM) shared the hardened bunker beneath Cheyenne Mountain with detachments of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and the United States Space Surveillance Network (SSN). Together these organizations bore primary responsibility for deterring strategic attacks on the United States and its allies by monitoring and tracking air and space-based threats.

Avery checked the missile's altitude – 150 kilometers and still climbing. That was good news for Manila. A ballistic path to strike the Philippines would have peaked by now. Avery allowed his muscles to relax just a little. All the logical short range targets for North Korea's aggression were now safe. But ballistic missiles can change direction in flight. Distant targets would not be so easy for NORAD and STRATCOM to identify.

It took a little more than an hour for the Command Director to issue an "all clear." The rocket stages had fallen away – causing no apparent damage upon impact – and the missile, or what was left of it, was no longer on a ballistic course to strike Earth.

After fourteen years of trying, it appeared that North Korea had finally delivered a satellite into space.

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On December 13<sup>th</sup>, the day after the missile firing, newscasters on North Korea's state-run television station proudly proclaimed the successful launch of their country's first satellite into space. The satellite was collecting data as designed, they said, and communications between the satellite and mission specialists in the launch control center were proceeding with regularity.

Outside Pyongyang, assessments of the mission's success were not as generous. Several international sources reported that, upon achieving a less-than-ideal elliptical orbit, the satellite had begun an uncontrolled "tumbling" through space. Others alleged, the satellite had issued no communications whatsoever since achieving its orbital position on launch day. A *New York Times* headline read: "North Korean Satellite Is Most Likely Dead."

Neither STRATCOM nor NORAD had issued public statements concerning the status of the earth's newest piece of space hardware. Privately, however, Lieutenant Avery and his colleagues couldn't suppress their pleasure at yet another North Korean failure.

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For weeks after the launch, scientists and technicians stationed at Cheyenne Mountain, Diego Garcia Island, White Sands New Mexico and other monitoring stations around the globe kept their electronic "eyes" on the North Korean satellite.

Their observations confirmed that the North Korean space craft had, indeed, failed to attain a stable attitude upon achieving orbit. In civilian terms, it was still tumbling.

In the political arena, North Korea persisted in its claim that the sole purpose of the missile launch had been to place its country's very first "weather satellite" into orbit. The United States government, on the other hand, took the position that the launch amounted to a "thinly-veiled" test of North Korea's ballistic missile technology, and a clear violation of UN Security Council resolutions aimed at restricting the rogue state's nuclear and ballistic missile ambitions.

The U.S. wasn't alone in its assessment. Other than the usual exceptions of Iran and Venezuela, international condemnation of the North Korean missile launch was unanimous. Even the People's Republic of China, Pyongyang's longtime backer at the UN, had eventually joined in supporting strengthened Security Council sanctions against North Korea's Supreme Leader, Kim Jong Un, and his repressive military regime.

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By May, 2013, the political uproar over the provocative missile launch had died down, and U.S. space defenders had pretty much lost interest in the nonfunctioning North Korean satellite.

By July, they ignored it entirely.

On August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2013, at 0815 GMT, something remarkable happened. Five hundred kilometers above the Pacific Ocean, on its 3,716<sup>th</sup> trip around the earth, the electronics onboard the tumbling North Korean satellite flickered to life. Computers powered up. The radio began receiving transmissions. And the satellite's internal gyroscopes began to spin.

North Korean patience had begun to pay off.

With the gyros on line, the satellite's "attitude" – its positioning as it travelled through space – slowly began to stabilize, erasing a few degrees of misalignment with each pass around the planet. Slowly but surely, the satellite's tumble became less and less pronounced until, in less than a day's time, the device was flying straight and steady along its orbital path.

Because the international experts had deemed the satellite "dead on arrival" in space, even private sector interest in observing the tumbling Korean experiment had waned. For the past several months, no one had tracked the satellite in real time. In fact, other than the occasional amateur astronomer peering through a university telescope, no one had actually laid eyes on the satellite at all.

The most up-to-date information the U.S. Defense Department possessed was from the computers at SSN. Their digital brains logged electronic check marks as the satellite passed through the North American detection "fence" several times a day.

The fence was a comprehensive system of electro-optical and radio detectors that captured daily data on every orbiting object to pass through its beam. That included more than 19,000 pieces of man-made debris the size of a baseball or larger, and another 300,000 pieces of orbiting space rubble as small as one centimeter in diameter, though no one bothered to track such tiny objects. Every man-made item – including the dead North Korean satellite – bore a unique identifier in SSN's orbital database. If the North Korean satellite had been out of place or absent when its arrival was expected at the fence, the computers would have registered an anomaly.

But the fence could only detect an object's size and location, not whether its attitude had changed . . . or for instance, whether it had stopped "tumbling." For this reason, the recent stabilization of the alleged weather satellite had escaped

detection as it floated, on schedule, through the fence's sensor array.

On the second orbit after achieving optimal attitude, the satellite received a radio transmission causing an aluminum panel on its side to retract into the hull. If someone with a strong enough telescope had been paying attention, they might have noticed the missing panel, or wondered about the open compartment. And if that someone had good timing and a keen eye, they might have even seen a perfect sphere, the size of a volleyball, springing forth from the opening and floating off on its own trajectory – the satellite and its former contents diverging in slow motion as both objects hurtled through space.

If that lucky someone had decided to check up on the satellite a mere five minutes later, they wouldn't have observed the second object at all, it would have been miles from its origin, speeding at twenty-three times the speed of sound on a de-orbiting course – a course that would send it on a fiery trip through the earth's atmosphere and ultimately to the planet below.

## CHAPTER 1

*Red Wing, Minnesota. Monday, August 5, 2013.*

“You’re going to have to tell me more about your ‘big discovery,’ Rodney, if you’re hoping I can help you,” I said to the man perched on the edge of my office side chair.

“Yeah . . . well . . . this has gotta be confidential, you know.” He looked from side to side as if someone were stalking him. “Lawyer-client privilege stuff.”

The man sitting across from me was Rodney Holton, a local farmer known more for his flimflamery than his agricultural acumen. Mine was probably the last lawyer’s office in Red Wing that Rodney hadn’t stiffed.

“Okay,” I said, tipping my swiveling, tilting, ultra-comfortable lawyer’s high-backed chair into a recline and locking my fingers over my abdominals. “Shoot.”

“Um . . .” Rodney reached into a front pocket of his worn OshKosh overalls and produced a crumpled dollar bill. Without making an effort to tidy the dollar in any way, Rodney reached across and dropped it on my desktop, along with a dusting from last year’s hay crop. “This is just to make it official,” he said, nodding at the bill.

I raised my eyebrows at Rodney.

“That’d get you about twelve seconds at my usual rate,” I said. “Got anything bigger in there?” I indicated his pocket with a crooked finger.

“No,” he said, seeming surprised that I hadn’t caught his drift. “It’s just . . . like . . . a formality . . . so nobody can claim you aren’t my lawyer.”

Rodney had no idea that, as a point of law, the dollar was neither necessary, nor in and of itself, sufficient, to establish a confidential relationship between us. That required a combination of expectation and intent.

I leaned forward and flattened the wrinkled dollar on my desk blotter, taking time to repair each dog-eared corner. If I agreed to listen to Rodney, and maybe to help him with his concerns, it was unlikely I would be paid for my trouble. Then again, how often does a client pop into a lawyer’s office with a “big discovery?” He had captured my interest.

After fixing the bill to my satisfaction, I folded it in half and tucked it in a shirt pocket.

“You just hired yourself a lawyer,” I said. “You’ve got your confidentiality. But all I’m agreeing to do at this point is hear you out. I can’t guarantee I can be of any help until I know more. Understand?”

“Yeah.”

“Good,” I said. “Then let’s hear all about it, starting at the beginning if you don’t mind.”

Rodney slid back in the chair, his hands gripping the armrests. He cracked his neck to both sides before beginning his tale.

“It was yesterday afternoon,” he said. “Sunday . . . and I was out on the John Deere checking my fields, you know . . . and all of a sudden I hear this sound. It was a kinda weird sound, you know?”

“Not really. Can you be more specific?” I had heard a lot of weird sounds in my day.

Rodney thought for a moment.

“It was kinda like *whoosh-thud . . . tumble, tumble, tumble,*” he said.

He could have stuck with “weird” if that was the best he could do.

“Go on,” I said.

“So I stood up and looked toward the sound.” He raised a hand to his brow and craned his neck, as though searching the horizon. “And something was knocking down my corn, like a big animal or something . . . not like a deer, more clumsy than that . . . maybe like a bear.” He looked to me for understanding.

“A bear,” I said, nodding.

It wasn’t a total impossibility that Rodney had encountered a bear in Ottawa County. There had been two or three confirmed sightings of black bear in the area over the past ten years. But his hypothesis wasn’t particularly likely either. I don’t remember anyone saying the other bears made a *whoosh-thud, tumble* sound. Then again, many interpretations are possible in the mind of an eyewitness . . . or in this case, ear-witness.

“This thing, whatever it was, knocked down maybe thirty or forty feet of head-high corn stalks, in a straight line,” he continued. “I saw the last ones go down.” He clapped one flattened hand downward onto the other. “Then all was quiet,” he said, passing a benediction over the serenity in my office.

He checked to make sure I was tracking. I gave him two thumbs up.

“Anyway,” he went on, “this thing’s trail was pretty obvious in the corn. But not knowing what in the heck it was, I was a little . . . you know . . . reluctant to investigate.”

Yeah. He was afraid it was a bear.

“But I found a good size wrench in a fender box and decided to take a chance.” He made a hammering motion as he wielded the imaginary wrench. “So I got off the tractor and slipped into the corn field, nice and quiet like.”

Rodney's story-telling momentum was gaining steam as he worked his way along. This was probably a first rendition of the "big discovery" story. He would no doubt smooth out earlier scenes on future iterations.

I stroked my chin as if contemplating the implications of Rodney's tale thus far. In truth, he hadn't said much of consequence yet, at least as far as I was concerned.

"So was it a bear?" I asked, hoping to hasten the denouement.

"I'm just getting to that," Rodney said, a touch of irritation in his voice. He'd paid me my buck, now I had darned well better listen.

"So my sleeves are rolled up and the corn leaves are cutting at me on all sides . . ."

Corn leaves have a sawlike edge that can induce lacerations similar to paper cuts, only longer and in greater quantity. The greatest danger is to the eyes.

"And I'm getting' closer and closer to the end of the broken corn," he went on, "and still no sign of the beast . . . or worse . . . that might have flattened my crop.

"So I'm getting more and more nervous, watchin' all around." He demonstrated "watching" by looking side to side. "And then . . . I was at the end of the trail, and I still didn't see nothing – no bear, no cougar, no nothing that might have caused this unexpected devastation."

Losing a few corn plants in a field of thousands can hardly be considered devastation. But one can allow Rodney a modicum of poetic license.

"So I stand up straight and look around," he said, "my wrench hand at the ready. But there's no sign of man nor beast. So I pull off my cap and scratch my head, figuring there has to be *something* here somewhere." Rodney reached for his cap,

then realizing he had placed it on my desk, aborted the gesture by smoothing the back of his hair.

“So I stoop down and start pawing through the grass with my gloves.” He leaned forward and pawed. Then he looked up at me. “I was wearing buckskins, of course.”

“Of course,” I said. “Would this be easier for you if you stood?” Sitting appeared to be cramping Rodney’s style.

“No thanks,” he said, righting himself in his chair. “I’m good.”

“Let’s see now. Where was I?” He gave me a dirty look for interrupting his flow.

“You were wearing gloves,” I said.

“Yeah. So I paw through the grass and then . . . just when I’m about to give up, the back of my hand hits something big and solid in the grass.” Rodney kicked the desk pedestal with his boot.

“Holy crap, Rodney,” I said, just about tipping my lawyer chair over backward. “Take it easy on the furniture.”

“Sorry,” he said, appearing to barely notice me.

“. . . and I’m thinking this must be it. This is the thing that’s killing my corn. It seemed too small for a bear, but maybe a wolverine, and them things can tear your arm right off . . . so I just watch for a few minutes . . . waitin’ to see what it does.”

Rodney’s eyes grew large with apprehension.

I didn’t recall there *ever* being a wolverine sighting in Ottawa County. Nevertheless, I nodded along. I did have the buck in my pocket after all.

“Wolverine,” I said dubiously.

“I said ‘maybe a wolverine,’” Rodney corrected.

“Right.”

“Anyway, I decided to give the thing a kick with my boot.” He made an odd jerking movement somewhere below my line

of sight that I assumed was a kick. I was thankful it missed my desk this time around.

“And *voilà*,” he said. “There it was.”

Apparently it was audience participation time.

“And what was it?” I asked obediently.

“Are you ready for this?” His eyes were wide and his showman’s hands extended.

“Never been more ready,” I said.

“It was a meteor!” Rodney waited for my amazed reaction.

I wasn’t as compliant this time. Part of my job as a lawyer is to question unsubstantiated conclusions – especially *unlikely* unsubstantiated conclusions.

“How do you know it was a meteor?” I asked, thinking the wolverine hypothesis might have been more plausible.

“Ahh,” he said, raising one finger in the air. “I knew you’d ask that.”

No one would mistake Rodney for a rocket scientist, but he could anticipate obvious questions well enough.

“Ahh,” I echoed, duplicating the raised finger gesture, while trying not to be disrespectful.

“First off, it *looks* like a meteor,” he said. “It’s mostly round, like a ball, and sorta burnt and crispy on the outside. It’s about yea big.” He formed a ten or twelve inch ball with his hands. “A fiery meteor would look just like that.”

I raised one eyebrow and tilted my head to indicate I would allow for that possibility.

“And when somethin’ like that falls dead outta the sky,” Rodney continued, “I figured there were only three possibilities for what this thing was.

“Number one: it could be something that fell off an airplane, or maybe *out of* an airplane. But if it came off an airplane, this thing is probably worthless . . . unless I could convince the

airline that it had somehow injured me when it landed. You know? Even though it didn't really."

I could see why Rodney required confidentiality.

"I would advise against that," I said, matter-of-factly. Rodney made a head gesture that I interpreted as "potayto potahto."

"Or number two . . ." he went on ". . . this thing could be some sort of space junk that just dropped out of orbit. But I figured if it belonged to some government, they probably wouldn't pay to get it back. Once I told 'em I had it, they'd probably just come and take it. Whatta you think? Can they do that?"

A request for legal advice.

The question Rodney had posed was one that many clients had posited during initial visits to my office. Oddly enough, the question was normally asked once some violator had already done what the client was asking if they could do. One would think the answer in such case was obvious, but I responded to Rodney's query anyway.

"Of course a government *could* take your 'meteor' if it wanted to," I said. "The real question is what, if anything, could you do about it?" This sort of response is one reason people coined the phrase "damn lawyers."

"What could I do?" he asked.

"Probably nothing without investing a ton of money in a lengthy lawsuit with no guarantee of success."

The lesson I had just given Rodney contains a sad truth that applies to the American legal system in general. We have all sorts of legal rights, and almost no practical remedies. In fact, as a lawyer, the very most I could *ever* hope to accomplish for *any* client would be to get them what they were entitled to in the first place – minus a reasonable fee, of course. And folks wonder why so many lawyers are depressed.

“That’s what I figured,” Rodney said. “So it’s probably not space junk.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “You determined what this object was based on whether you could make money off it?”

“Well, yeah.” He said it like I was crazy to think otherwise. “If I don’t know for sure what it is, why not have it be something that’ll make me rich. Which brings me to option number three: it’s a meteor.”

“I can’t wait to hear this,” I said.

“Weren’t you watchin’ CNN when that huge meteor hit Russia? They had some experts on there who said that baby was worth maybe \$22,000 an *ounce*. Mine’s only ten pounds, but that’s still over three and a half million bucks. Not exactly chump change.”

I didn’t think many people shared Rodney’s optimistic approach to identifying mysterious objects. Then again, who knows?

“I can see how you’ve reasoned this out,” I said, “but let me ask, if I may, what you’ll say when people want to have an assayer take a look at your ‘meteor’?”

“A what?” Rodney didn’t like the sound of the word.

“An assayer,” I said. “A professional who certifies the authenticity of rocks and gems . . . and in this case, meteors. Don’t you think your buyers will want a certificate or something?”

“Oh,” Rodney said, relieved. “If that’s all . . . I can *make* certificates, and they’ll look darn official, too.”

This fellow was a fine example of American ingenuity.

“Don’t do that,” I said. “It’s illegal.”

I got the potayto potahto look again.

“Have you researched this meteor thing at all,” I asked, “other than a few months ago on CNN?”

“Sure.” Rodney settled in his chair. “I went to the library and the lady there helped out. And I can use Google, too, you know. I ain’t no idiot.”

There was no point discussing a new issue at this juncture.

“In your academic pursuit of positive identification of the ‘meteor,’ did you come across anything at all that might tend to contradict your meteor theory?” I asked.

“Well,” he said. “To be completely honest, there were a couple things that sorta bugged me.”

“For instance?” I said.

“For instance,” he said, “meteor strikes are pretty rare. People don’t find meteors every day. But heck, they gotta hit somewhere, right?”

Ever the optimist.

“And I thought a meteor would be hotter than blazes,” Rodney continued. “But it turns out that small ones, like mine, actually slow down enough to cool off before they hit. Who’d of thought, eh?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Not me.”

“But the biggest thing . . . the biggest problem . . . is that meteors have craters and mine doesn’t have a crater. But if that’s the only issue, I’m sure I can find a way around that.”

Rodney simply did not comprehend the scientific method. Or perhaps, he just liked the “Rodney method” better.

“Is that the end of your story?” I asked, after waiting for more.

“Yeah,” he said. “But I still got a couple questions.” He pointed toward the folded bill in my pocket to remind me I was on retainer.

“Why not,” I said. “Fire away.”

“Whatta you know about meteors and radiation?” he asked. “I mean, do you think my meteor might be radioactive or something?”

“Honestly, Rodney,” I said, “that’s not my area of expertise. I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay. I’ll just make sure to wear gloves and keep the thing someplace where I’m . . . whatta they call it . . . shielded from radiation.”

“I strongly advise you to get competent counsel on that issue,” I said. “Strongly!”

“Okay,” Rodney said, discounting my advice. “Just one last question then. Do you happen to have a relationship with an assayer who’s sort of . . . you know . . .” Rodney leaned forward and whispered, “in your pocket, so to speak?”

“No,” I said, standing. “If that’s it then, would you like to pay the bill now or should I mail it to you?” I was pretty sure I knew the answer.

“Just send that out to the farm. I’ll put a check in the mail when I ship my next load of beef.”

“You *do* have beef, right?”

Rodney stood up and made a face, pretending to be offended. But he recovered quickly.

“Best Herefords this side of the Pecos,” he said, hooking two thumbs in his belt. “Best meteor, too.”

Okay,” I said. “I’ll drop that bill in the mail.”

We shook hands, and he left.

## CHAPTER 2

*Ames, Iowa. Six weeks before the discovery at Rodney Holton's farm.*

Kent Evans shoved his laptop away from him, sending stacks of papers scattering.

"Damn it!" he said out loud as he pushed his chair away from the desk.

"Everything okay down there?" Jeannie called from the kitchen.

Kent cringed. He knew he'd neglected his wife and kids lately. But if he didn't find a solution to his crippled financial situation soon, he would have let them down in an even bigger way. No matter how he juggled the figures, Kent couldn't make his family's budget balance.

Evans was a thirty-six year old, self-employed veterinary pharmacist. He and his wife Jeannie had moved to this 1950s rambler on Harriet Street in Ames, Iowa more than ten years ago. At one time, when business was good, they had actually owned the house free and clear. But like so many others, the Evanses had fallen victim to a souring world economy and plummeting real estate values, two developments they'd failed to see coming until after they had refinanced the house and Kent's pharmaceutical sales receipts had dwindled.

Purchases of bovine antibiotics, vaccines, and hi-tech feed supplements had driven the majority of Kent's former income. With the decline of disposable cash in the late part of the past decade, consumers had stretched their food dollars by scrimping on beef purchases. The dip in retail demand for beef had squeezed producer profit margins to the point where prices "at the gate" barely covered the cost of raising the herds.

Cattle producers couldn't stop feeding their animals, but they could reduce their costs in other ways. Some farmers cut back on preventive veterinary care – vaccines, in particular. Others refused to pay, or were unable to pay, their veterinarians for services rendered. Those bad account losses in turn caused vet clinics to pull back firmly on advance orders of medicines and specialty supplies, leading ultimately to Kent Evans' dilemma.

The cascade of economic crap in the beef industry didn't differ greatly from the chain of events faced by many other businesses. It just happened to be the struggles of the beef industry that had brought Kent Evans to his knees.

Still, he was determined to insulate Jeannie and the kids from the family's financial distress.

"Yeah. Everything's fine," he called back. His tone carried a forced cheerfulness. "I just deleted a file I should have kept. No worries. I've got a backup."

Jeannie poked her head down the staircase.

"Okay," she said. "Will you be joining the family for dinner tonight? It would be nice to share a meal . . . you know, with *all* of us at one table."

He rotated his chair toward Jeannie.

"I'm sorry, Hon. I've *got* to fill these orders for a rush delivery tomorrow. I'll make sure to come up at bedtime to say goodnight." He offered a helpless smile.

“Okay.” There was a hint of sadness in her voice. “I’ll put some meatloaf on a plate for you to eat later.”

“Thanks, Hon. Tell the kids I’m sorry. Will you?”

He heard her sigh as she headed back up the stairs.

“Not much to say to them, really, is there.” It wasn’t a question.

He had deserved that. Kent’s stomach churned. If there was something more to be said, he would have said it. Sadly, words weren’t going to help anything right now. He needed a plan, a plan to earn more money, or find more money . . . or *steal* more money?

Kent gave his head a shake as if to banish the thought.

*No. It hadn’t come to that. At least not yet.*

He pulled his chair back under the desk and retrieved the laptop. Punching up an Excel spreadsheet, he stared at the screen, its contents confirming the poorly performing endeavor his business had become.

As he paged down the rows of dates, names, and numbers, an idea began to form in his head. There just might be a way he could influence sales after all. A way he hadn’t tried yet. A course of action that could bump receipts dramatically, without actually stealing from anyone. It was a long shot, and he needed to think this idea through before proceeding. After all, it wouldn’t technically be legal. But at least this plan offered . . . what? . . . a chance – a glimmer of hope he hadn’t felt in what seemed like forever.

*Desperate circumstances call for desperate measures.*

### CHAPTER 3

*Red Wing, Minnesota.*

“Radio says Rodney Holton’s got a show in the works,” I said as Beth entered our kitchen. I couldn’t reveal client confidences, but if he was going to advertise . . . well, that was something different entirely.

It was 7:30 a.m. and Beth had just returned from her morning run. I turned from reading the *Minneapolis Tribune* and smiled at her.

“I just finished brewing a fresh pot of dark roast. May I fetch you an official James Becker Attorney-at-Law mug?”

Beth wore her usual warm-weather jogging attire – a white sleeveless top over a jog bra and black spandex shorts. She was perspiring the perfect amount such that her physical exertion was evident, but her feminine appeal remained intact.

“I appreciate your offer, Babe. But I think I’ll try cold water first.” She smiled.

Even after twenty-six years of marriage, I still loved that smile.

“Right,” I said, watching as Beth retrieved an athlete’s plastic water bottle from the fridge and squirted cold water into her mouth. I abandoned the newspaper and stepped directly in front of Beth, placing one hand on either side of her waist, and planted a peck in the center of her dewy forehead.

“Rodney puts on a good show,” Beth said, lifting her water bottle up under my chin. I backed away far enough to let her drink. She swallowed. “What’s his angle?”

“He claims he got hit by a meteor. Well . . . not Rodney himself. I guess it’s on his lawn.” He must have decided showing off the meteor while it was still in his corn field would ruin even more of his crop.

“How convenient,” Beth said. “I wonder whether he mowed the grass right before it hit.” She smiled.

“Yeah, convenient,” I said, returning her smile. “Anyway, I’m sure Rodney will arrange for meteor pictures in the paper as soon as he can get a reporter out there. But we can see it right now if you’re up for the drive out to his place.”

Beth moved to the sink, splashed water on her face, and patted it down with a clean terrycloth hand towel.

“It *is* a beautiful August morning out there,” she said, turning to me. “I’ll grab a quick shower. Then let’s go see what Rodney’s got cooking.” Beth started for the stairs.

“Remember to wash behind your ears,” I said.

Beth must have been expecting me to say something because the towel was already balled up when she fired it at my face.

“Never mind,” I said.

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It was about a fifteen minute drive to Rodney’s farm. Even though the weather would have been perfect for Beth’s Spyder convertible, we’d be traveling on gravelled back roads and neither of us cared for the dust. So we took my grey Honda Pilot.

In Ottawa County, most folks either knew someone Rodney had scammed, or had fallen victim to one of his shady schemes themselves. But Rodney had the magical appeal of a carnival

sideshow operator. You knew you were going to get cheated somehow. You just wanted to see how he would do it.

As we crept up Rodney's dirt driveway, we met another vehicle on its way out. The car held a mom and a dad with three screaming kids in the back seat. Dad was driving and he didn't look happy. Beth and I exchanged glances.

As we got close to the farmstead, we could see what we suspected was the reason for the bawling kids. Rodney was charging twenty bucks a head to view "Ottawa County's Only Outer-Space Meteor." I guessed Dad had declined to pony up a C-note for his family of five to enjoy this "Otherworldly Phenomenon," as Rodney's ubiquitous signage advertised.

Parking space at Rodney's was plentiful, so I swung the Honda onto a grassy patch near a barn-red wooden outbuilding and we both hopped out.

Rodney approached us with a big smile.

"Once in a lifetime chance to see Ottawa County's very own phenomenon of nature. Just twenty bucks." He winked at me and patted his shirt pocket.

*Confidentiality.* I nodded knowingly.

"Don't s'pose you'll let me put that on account?" I asked.

"Sorry. Cash only." Rodney was all smiles.

Naturally.

While I dug for my money, Rodney was appreciating his view of Beth in her sun glasses, safari shirt, and tan pleated shorts. His was more than a casual look, and I could tell Beth noticed.

"Here you go," I said, drawing his attention as I handed him a twenty.

"Each," he said, still smiling, and now focusing on Beth's tanned legs.

I was about to comment when Beth beat me to the punch.

"Lose something?" she asked him, placing a hand on her hip.

Rodney spluttered and straightened up while I stifled a laugh.

Slipping another bill from my money clip, I passed it his way.

“Do we get stamped or something?” I asked.

Rodney looked at me to see if I was serious. I did my best to look grave.

Rodney reestablished a broad grin. “Naw. Not necessary. We operate on the honor system here.”

“Gotcha,” I said, trying not to choke. “So where’s the show?”

Rodney turned halfway as he started off, motioning for us to follow. “Right this way Mr. . . . ?”

He was going all out on the lawyer-client privilege thing.

“Becker,” I said. “This is the missus. She’s *not* on exhibit today.”

Rodney smiled sheepishly at Beth.

“I carry a gun,” I added.

His smile disappeared.

“I do, too,” Beth said, without missing a beat.

We followed a now-silent Rodney toward his house. As we rounded the corner, Rodney’s exhibit came into view.

He’d arranged a dozen or more orange rubber road cones around what he must have judged to be the appropriate perimeter. Protruding from the cone tops were wooden yardsticks to which Rodney had affixed a circle of yellow “Caution” tape that encompassed the entire “Strike Zone.” In the center of it all, resting in what looked for all the world to be a pterodactyl nest made from freshly dug and carefully toasted dirt, was a large black lump I presumed to be the meteor. A suspiciously uniform circular area of black and crispy-looking grass surrounded the nest. I tried to envision how heat or fire could have originated at the center and burned outward in the pattern depicted in the exhibit. I couldn’t.

“You will notice the indentation in the ground beneath the meteor,” Rodney said, gesturing toward the nest. “That feature is what’s commonly known as an impact crater.” He waited for a reaction.

“Aren’t you worried about radiation?” Beth asked. “I noticed you’re not wearing a dosimeter, and you didn’t offer them to us either.”

“I’m glad you asked that, Mrs. Becker.” He produced a small electronic device from his front jeans pocket. “This right here is a digital Geiger counter and dosimeter combination. I got one yesterday.”

“I thought his thing just landed Sunday,” I said, matter-of-factly.

“Express delivery, my good man.” He beamed another smile, undaunted.

“I see,” I said. “Have the news crews been out here yet? I bet they’d love a good ‘man finds meteor in side yard’ story.”

Rodney sensed my sarcasm.

“As a matter of fact, the press *have* been here. And for your further edification, I didn’t *find* this meteor. I was right here when it hit.” He looked toward Beth. I guess he figured I had already heard the story.

“Wow. What did it look like coming in?” I said with a grin.

Rodney grinned back.

“To be honest,” he said, “it came in faster than the human eye can see. The first thing I did was *hear* it. A second later I turned and it was right there.” He pointed at the black object and paused to check my reaction.

“Right there?” I asked. “Not out in some field or something?”

“Nope,” he said flashing a glare my way and patting his shirt pocket feverishly. “That’s where she hit. Can’t you see the crater?” He smiled at Beth.

“Right in your yard,” I said. “Helluva thing. What did it look like the moment you found it?” I might as well get the updated version of the meteor tale. I had forked over forty bucks after all.

Rodney scrambled to fill in the details.

“Of course it was glowing and steaming and the heat was something fierce. You can see where it burned the grass all around.” Again, he gestured into the exhibit area. “It took a couple hours for the thing to cool down to a point where I could actually touch it.”

The scene on Rodney Holton’s lawn had obviously been staged. But had this . . . this black lump . . . actually fallen from the sky? And had Rodney been present when it hit, as he had told me yesterday? If so, this might not be a meteor, but it might still be interesting.

“Of course, you’ve had an assayer perform tests to prove it’s a meteor and not something else,” I said. “Right?”

Rodney raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t think I need any tests to show it’s a meteor. Like I said, I was right here when the damn thing hit! Besides, what else do you think it is? A scud missile? A big chunk of acid rain?” Rodney was heating up.

“I’m not doubting you, Rodney. I’m just saying . . . if you want skeptics to believe you when you tell them a meteor just landed in your yard, you might want to have some science to back you up.” I paused while Rodney cooled off. “I’m just saying . . .”

“You got your twenty bucks’ worth yet?” he asked. He wasn’t tapping his foot, but he might as well have been.

I turned toward Beth. She raised her sun glasses and returned my look.

“Okay. Thanks, Rodney.” I said. “Nice exhibit.”

Rodney tended the “Caution” tape as Beth and I returned to the Pilot.

“Quite a character . . . isn’t he?” Beth said after the engine was running and the AC turned up.

“That he is, my dear. That he is.”

## CHAPTER 4

*Ames, Iowa.*

In the days following his financial epiphany, veterinary pharmaceutical salesman, Kent Evans, worked diligently to formulate a plan of action that would bring his hopes of increased income to fruition.

Kent's part time position as adjunct faculty at the Iowa State University College of Veterinary Medicine provided him with ample opportunity to pick the brains of fellow faculty members. Among the numerous veterinary medicine specialists in residence there, he found the microbiology researchers most helpful. Spending long hours in the university labs, these hardworking DVMS, PhDs, and MDs, together with their doctoral candidate assistants, stood at the cutting edge of animal disease and treatment research.

If there was a way for Kent to affect demand for his veterinary products, these people would know what it was. But he couldn't exactly come out and ask them how best to infect farm animals to drive demand for medicines, now could he?

So he asked questions like: What kind of vaccines are you working with this week? Are animal antibiotics keeping up with new superbugs? Are farmers using the best medicinal practices these days, or are they taking unnecessary risks with animal health? What's the livestock disease *du jour*?

He distributed his questions among various researchers and clinicians to avoid suspicion.

Kent had been hanging around the labs for a couple weeks, observing experiments and cleaning up work spaces after the experimenting was done, when he attracted the unwanted attention of the Microbiology Chair. One evening, as Kent was wiping down a vacuum enclosure, Professor Alan Wittmann, PhD, appeared over Kent's shoulder.

"Mr. Evans."

Startled by the sound of his name, Kent nearly knocked over the flask containing the cleaning solution.

"Doctor Wittmann. What brings you to the lab at this hour?" Kent would have offered to shake hands, but that would be bad form in rubber gloves.

"I suppose I could ask you the same thing, Evans. It has come to my attention that you have taken a serious interest in lab work recently. Commendable. Commendable, indeed. But may I ask . . . is there motive to your newfound zeal? Is there an endgame in this effort?" Dr. Wittmann raised his bushy eyebrows and dipped his head just a bit forward.

Kent had long ago prepared an answer for this question. Nevertheless, he now found himself worrying whether his explanation would suffice.

"Ha. Yes. My newfound zeal." *Stop muttering!* "Er. As you know, Doctor Wittmann, times have been tough with my day job lately."

Wittmann showed no sign of comprehension.

"Veterinary sales?" Kent offered.

"Ah, yes. The economy. Utterly intolerable."

The irony of Wittmann's commiseration with the private sector on the issue of diminished earnings wasn't lost on Kent.

"Yes. It is. Utterly intolerable." *Stop repeating him and get to the point.* "Anyway, I'm here looking for an edge . . .

something that will give my income a boost, you know.” That was true, of course.

“You’re looking for full time work at the University then?”

Kent hadn’t expected that.

“Umm. Are you hiring, Doctor?” A regular paycheck with no legal infractions would solve his economic problems, too.

“No. We aren’t.”

“Well . . . that’s okay because, as much as it would be an honor to work here – full time, I mean – I’m really just looking for insights that will help me in my *current* job. Some extra knowledge of livestock health or emerging standards of treatment that might give me a leg up on the competition.” There was a pause. “To sell more medicine and vaccines than the other guy. To help keep my boat afloat during this economic drought, if you will.”

“I see,” Dr. Wittmann said, stroking his chin and nodding. “Well, we appreciate your volunteer help around the lab . . . and your teaching as well, of course. I just wanted to be clear that we aren’t seeking paid researchers at the moment.”

Relief washed over Kent.

“That’s not a problem, Doctor. Not at all. Like I said, I’m happy to help out. No charge. I appreciate you guys letting me hang around.”

“It is most certainly our pleasure to have you here, Evans. No one likes to do their own dishes. Am I right?” The Doctor smiled the condescending smile of one who would never stoop so low as to do his own dishes.

Kent raised his hand, notching a point in the air with his yellow-gloved finger, and smiled back. “Right you are, Doctor.”

“Well, carry on with your . . . uh . . . duties then. I’ll be off.” With a perfunctory wave, Doctor Wittmann left the lab.

Kent released the air he’d been unconsciously holding inside his lungs. If he found a casual conversation with a university

colleague stressful, he had to wonder whether he had the mettle to risk imprisonment, to actually *infect* a herd with a disease as yet undetermined.

\* \* \*

After spending a couple weeks at the University Lab, Kent had learned a great deal. Aside from longstanding and pervasive worries about overuse of antibiotics and the drug-resistant bacterial mutations the practice engendered, the state of American livestock health was pretty darned good. No contagions on the horizon. No intractable parasitic infestations. The gamble livestock producers had taken in reducing preventative medicine for their herds seemed to have caused the animals no ill effects – at least not on a scale that mattered.

This discovery was bad news for the veterinary drug industry – and not just in the short term. If farmers and feedlot operators could raise healthy stock without all the vaccines and preventative antibiotics they'd been purchasing in large quantities before the economic recession, why would they choose to buy these products again even after the financial crunch had ended? Kent doubted whether those sales would ever come back.

In short, Kent's new information made the long-term profitability of his career choice seem even less likely than he had imagined . . . and the success of a plan to stimulate sales, of paramount importance.

But of all the disease candidates likely to infect a livestock herd in the U.S., Kent had found none that would cause the industry enough concern to dramatically impact his product sales. North America was a veritable haven for healthy livestock production.

For Kent, the conclusion was inevitable. If U.S. farm animals were well insulated from domestic health threats, he needed to introduce a foreign pathogen . . . something the U.S. livestock industry hadn't experienced in a very long time, if ever. Something that had the capacity to ignite an epidemic – actually an epizootic, he reminded himself – of unprecedented scale, large enough to gain the attention of an entire industry. And he knew just where to go to get a sample of such an agent.

\* \* \*

Finding a charge card company that would increase his credit line enough to cover the \$1,500 of travel expenses wasn't easy. And explaining to his wife, Jeannie, why he would be unreachable for several days was even harder. But two days later, Kent was ticketed to board a plane bound for Johannesburg, South Africa.

"I don't understand why, if your cell phone won't have service in west Texas, you can't at least email me once a day. Or call me collect on a landline."

"Hon, you know I'll miss you and the kids. But Sanofi is covering the cost of this trip so I can promote their new anti-parasitic. I can't risk losing their good faith by running up hotel bills or long distance charges. And heaven knows we can't afford to cover those extras ourselves right now. You understand. Right?"

He was persistent and she had finally relented.

\* \* \*

One plane ride and forty-eight hours later, after visiting a remote South African tribal farming area, Kent Evans was at his hotel, busily packing a small pottery vase for shipping home to

Iowa. In lieu of Styrofoam packing peanuts, he cushioned the inside of the cardboard box with dozens of plastic baggies stuffed with crumpled facial tissue. The padded baggies would protect the vase from breaking while in transit to the U.S., and would also insulate the parcel's more important contents from the frigid temperatures it might otherwise experience during air travel.

Hidden inside one of the baggies were two facial tissues containing saliva specimens from a local farmer's cow. Though not a particularly elegant, nor scientifically recommended, vessel for transporting a living organism around the world, that wadded up, slobbery Kleenex, Kent knew, held enough picornavirus to infect hundreds of cattle. And he had confidence in the hardiness of the samples. This virus was tough to kill. It would arrive home safely.

## CHAPTER 5

*Ottawa County, Minnesota.*

“What do you suppose inspired us to spend forty dollars and half a morning to participate in Rodney Holton’s latest money maker?” Beth mused as we navigated the gravel roadways on our way home from the meteor exhibit.

“Too much time and money on our hands?” I said.

Beth laughed.

“All jokes aside, though, you have to give Rodney credit for creativity,” I continued. “In just the past couple years he’s been struck by lightning, his corn crib fell into a sinkhole, a bear attacked him in his kitchen . . . Is that about it?”

“He taught his dog to say, ‘I love you,’” Beth said.

“That’s right. ‘Wry ruv rue.’ That one was totally legit.”

Beth laughed again. “Where does he come up with these crazy ideas?”

“Well,” I said, “he probably watches the news on TV. If it catches his eye, he thinks ‘I can do that,’ and a scam is born. As P.T. Barnum was so fond of saying . . .”

“I know,” Beth interrupted. “There’s one born every minute. So what does that make us?”

“Customers,” I said. “Definitely not the other thing.”

“Right,” Beth said dubiously.

“Right,” I confirmed, as I steered the Pilot from the gravel onto a stretch of pavement. “But did you find anything curious about the meteor display?”

Beth raised an eyebrow at me. “Was there part of it that *wasn't* curious? The charred bowling ball and the hole he'd obviously dug for it to sit in seemed suspicious to me. Then there was the burnt grass. Rodney draws a nice circle.”

It was my turn to laugh.

“He does have a tendency to overplay a bit, doesn't he? But I was thinking about something he said. That he hadn't actually seen the meteor hit the ground. If you were Rodney, wouldn't you have seen the meteor strike from your kitchen window? Or barely avoided being hit while mowing the lawn? The fact that he only *heard* it hit is . . . well . . . it's just not Rodney. It makes me think that, just maybe, his meteor really did fall out of the sky.”

“Hmm.” Beth patiently considered my observation. “I don't know, Babe. Do you think he maybe just messed up a little? It must be hard to be perfectly slippery all the time.”

“I would agree with you one hundred percent, O Wise and Beautiful One, if Rodney wasn't such a natural. I mean, he doesn't play act these weird scenarios. He *lives* them. I really think he convinces himself before moving on to anybody else.”

“Maybe that's true,” Beth said. “It would explain his amazingly successful career as a snake oil salesman. But I don't believe for a minute that Rodney's black horse egg is really a meteor, no matter how poorly he tells the story.”

Black horse egg . . . I just love Beth's sense of humor.

“I'm sure you're right, Hon. It's just a nit I couldn't resist picking.”

“You've got a knack for that, Babe,” Beth said as she watched the farm fields slipping past her window.

Beth was correct, of course. I was seldom satisfied until I had sharpened the pencil all the way to the eraser.

“Definitely, a knack,” I said. “But I’m going to see if I can get a closer look at the meteor another day anyway. What can it hurt?”

Beth considered.

“I’ll confess that it seems one of your less perilous undertakings. As you say, ‘What can it hurt?’”

## CHAPTER 6

*Ames, Iowa.*

The flight home from South Africa had been uneventful. As it turned out, Kent Evans could have brought the virus-laden cow slobber in his carry-on luggage. He answered the Customs questions correctly – *No, he hadn't visited a farm while traveling. No, he wasn't bringing any agricultural products into the United States* – and the agent had taken him at his word.

Still, he was glad he had chosen to ship the virus as a separate package via courier service. That way, even if the parcel had been opened and inspected, they would have been looking for drugs, or guns . . . not cow spit. And given the resemblance between the tainted Kleenexes and the scores of others he'd used to pack the vase, the chances of parcel inspectors detecting the virus seemed slim.

Even if by some miracle of Customs inspection genius, the pathogen was discovered inside the package, he was only the box's addressee. There was no way to prove he had sent it. If agents attempted to pin some USDA violation on him, he would deny any knowledge of the vase or its packing materials. *Perhaps it was a gift from a tribesman he had befriended, he would say, or a comp from the tiny hotel where he had slept*

*during his visit?* With no return address on the package, how could *he* possibly know who had mailed it to him.

He smiled at his own cleverness.

By the time the green Subaru wagon pulled into his driveway in Ames, Iowa, Kent's west Texas cover story was rehearsed and ready for delivery to Jeannie. The flower bouquet – allegedly a perk from Sanofi for a job well done – would help, too.

\* \* \*

Three days later, the DHL driver delivered the parcel from South Africa to the Iowa State University Microbiology Lab, addressed to Kent's attention. It was waiting in his University mail cubby that evening when he arrived to teach a night class.

Before returning home that night, Kent visited a garbage dumpster behind the Animal Sciences building. After checking to make sure he was alone, he opened the package, smashed the vase and disposed of everything – everything, that is, except the baggie containing his hope for a better future through science.

## CHAPTER 7

### *Red Wing, Minnesota.*

It was the day after Beth and I had viewed the meteor exhibit at Rodney Holton's farm, and the tiny glitch in Rodney's story had been niggling at my brain ever since. If he had manufactured the entire meteor story, why wouldn't he have seen it hit?

My experience on the Team had taught me never to ignore niggling details. But small town Minnesota was a far cry from the militarized streets of Damascus, or the conspiratorial conference rooms of Mumbai. It seemed likely that my inability to shake this gut feeling about Rodney's meteor was a vestigial twitch left over from my former career.

I hadn't visited Gunner in a while. Maybe he could talk some sense into me.

Gunner was Ottawa County's Chief Deputy Sheriff, Doug Gunderson. Gunner and I had known each other since high school, and other than Beth, he was the only soul in Ottawa County who had any inkling how I had spent my life during my twenty-year absence from Red Wing. I had never planned to let Gunner in on my secrets. But he can be an assiduous investigator, and eventually, I had decided sharing a few details with Gunner would be preferable to his constant inquisition. He

had promised to keep my secrets. And to date, he'd proven trustworthy in that regard.

It was a few minutes past 10:00 a.m. when I swung the Pilot into the parking lot at the Ottawa County Law Enforcement Center – or LEC to those who preferred acronyms. According to the uniformed receptionist/dispatcher behind the bulletproof glass window, Gunner was in his office.

“Please let him know James Becker is here to see him,” I said.

The clerk obliged by buzzing him on her phone.

“He'll be with you shortly,” she said. “Please have a seat.”

I glanced behind me at the rows of yellow molded plastic chairs. I'd sat in those before. I doubted my lumbar region was a match for their George Jetson-like curvature.

“Thanks. I think I'll stand.”

I checked the walls of the reception area to see if the County had invested in any new artwork. Nope. I swiped two fingers across the top of the metal rectangle that framed head shots of Sheriffs from times gone by. Dusty.

I turned to the clerk who'd apparently been watching my every move. They train them to do that at the academy.

I raised my filthy digits in her direction.

“I'm sure nobody noticed,” I said, making an excuse for whoever's job it was to dust this place.

If anyone actually said “harumph” in real life, it would have been the desk clerk at that moment. Instead, she just raised an eyebrow and answered an incoming call – eyes still trained in my direction.

*No need to shoot the messenger*, I thought.

Some folks have no desire to achieve excellence. A fair number of them seem to be in government employ. That's too bad, too, because the underachievers give a bad rep to those of us civil servants who take pride in our work.

“Becker.” It was Gunner’s voice from behind me. “You coming or what?”

I turned to face the Chief Deputy and smiled. He was holding open the door to the inner offices, where all the police work gets done.

“Morning, Gunner,” I said as I crossed the reception area and slipped past him through the open door.

I knew the way to Gunner’s office, so I led and Gunner followed. When we arrived outside his door, I allowed him to enter first. He eyeballed me as he walked past.

“Did I do something wrong?” I asked after he’d passed by.

Gunner maneuvered behind his olive green, 1950s style, metal desk, and sat down in a matching desk chair. I followed him inside, closing the door behind me. Gunner hadn’t as yet answered my question.

I stood watching as Gunner straightened a stack of manila files on one corner of the desk then jammed a yellow pencil into his electric desk sharpener. The sound sent a shiver up my back. When the pencil was pointed enough – or short enough, it’s hard to know – Gunner blew the wood shavings off its tip and tucked it inside his top middle desk drawer.

“Trying out a new interrogation technique?” I asked. “Pencil-boarding?” I smiled.

Gunner squeezed both cheeks between his hands until his lips puckered. I have no idea whether that maneuver was intended to express frustration, boredom, psychotic tendencies, or something else.

After a few moments, Gunner motioned me to sit in one of the vinyl and metal side chairs across the desk from him. For no reason I can think of, I suddenly wondered why they were called side chairs when they were almost never on the *side* of the desk. Maybe they were actually *other side* chairs?

“So to what do I owe the pleasure?” Gunner said finally, offering no clue to his earlier off-putting behavior. Sometimes he can be an enigma.

“Glad you asked.” I glanced across the room at the Mr. Coffee. The carafe was nearly full. “Mind if I pour myself a cup?” My eyes were on Gunner as I extended an arm in the direction of the pot.

“Might as well. If this is going to be a long story, maybe you can get me one, too.” It didn’t sound like a request.

“As long as you asked so politely . . .”

I poured us each a Styrofoam cup of black java and returned to the desk, passing Gunner’s coffee his way and sampling my own. I judged the viscosity of today’s batch to be roughly equivalent to thirty-weight motor oil. Not bad for Cop Shop brew.

“Anyway . . .” I continued, “I was wondering whether you’ve heard about the meteor strike out at Rodney Holton’s farm?”

Gunner chuckled. “Yeah. I heard.”

“Well, Beth and I went out to see it yesterday.”

“Cost you twenty bucks?” Gunner asked.

“Apiece.”

“Ouch.” Gunner felt my pain. “So . . .”

“So what?”

“So what was it? What was ol’ Rodney passing off as space rock?”

“Good question.” Did I mention Gunner was an assiduous investigator? “It looked a lot like a jumbo charcoal briquette, or maybe a bowling ball.” I sipped some more coffee.

“Did it have finger holes?”

“Not that I saw. But they might have been on the bottom. Visitors couldn’t touch the meteor on account of the Caution tape around the ‘Strike Zone.’”

“Okay,” Gunner said. “Now you got my curiosity piqued. Where’d the flaming Brunswick from space ‘strike’?”

“It was actually pretty convenient . . . for viewing, I mean. It landed right in Rodney’s side yard. There was a little crater there and everything.”

Just then the coffee I’d been drinking made my mouth pucker involuntarily. That was unusual.

“Well, L-O-L!” Gunner offered, a jolly smile on his face.

“Huh?” I said.

The smile disappeared and Gunner folded his arms across his chest. “It means ‘Laugh Out Loud.’ Everybody writes it on emails and stuff. Don’t you give me no guff.”

“Yeah . . . on emails,” I said. “Nobody actually *says* L-O-L with their mouth.”

Gunner looked wounded.

“You got more on this story or not?” he said, choosing not to discuss his gaffe further.

“Well, other than one thing Rodney said, his exhibit was pretty much what you’d expect – lots of melodrama and overblown special effects. But when I asked him if he actually saw the meteor hit, he said he *heard* it, then turned around and saw it sitting there, smoking and glowing and playing the National Anthem and yada yada yada.

“My point, though, is that he admitted he didn’t *see* it hit. Now why would a guy like Rodney almost get hit by a meteor and not claim to have seen it with his own eyes? That stupid question kept me awake all last night and ruined breakfast for me this morning. Am I crazy? Or what?”

Gunner smiled and choked down a laugh. “You need somethin’ real to worry about, Beck. Pretty soon you’ll be frettin’ over the laundry pilin’ up.”

“So you don’t think it’s unusual for Rodney to play down his story like that?”

“Oh, no. That’s totally not like Rodney. Under normal circumstances, I’d have bet a hundred bucks Rodney would’ve laid eyes on any meteor that came down in his general vicinity. Hell, I’d have thought he’d have pictures of the fireball in flight.”

“So, Gunner. Do you think this anomaly in Rodney’s story might mean something . . . I don’t know . . . interesting?”

Gunner wiped the smile off his face.

“Honestly? I can’t imagine what. Maybe he’s just losing his touch. Whatta *you* think it means?”

“Hell, I don’t know. You were supposed to tell me I was wasting my time thinking about this and that it wasn’t unusual at all for Rodney to only *hear* the meteor hit and not *see* it.”

“Well, if it helps, I *do* think you’re wasting your time.”  
Gunner smiled.

“Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. For now, it looks like I’m going to have to spend another Jackson to get a closer look at Rodney’s bowling ball meteor. When I figure out what’s up, I’ll let you know.”

I stood to leave.

“Hey. Hold on a minute,” Gunner said. “If you’re lookin’ for a puzzler to take your mind off Rodney, I got a guy coming in says his neighbor’s up to something sinister. Would you like to sit in?”

I took a deep breath, letting it out slowly through my nose. A diversion wasn’t what I’d come here for, but it’d do.